LOS ANGELES TIMES
22 September 1985

ARTICLE APPEARED ON PAGE 5
PART IV

'Spies Out': a Wide-Screen Bloc-buster

By Ross Thomas

After moonlighting as a British-Danish double agent for 19 of the 23 years that he served the KGB, Oleg A. Gordievski, 46, decided to pack it all in last July and ask British masters for political asylum, so that he could, in the pious words of a Whitehall handout, "become a citizen of a democratic society."

What the handout neglected to mention was a report that the KGB had ordered Gordievski to return to Moscow forthwith for "consultations," which most likely meant interrogation, a bit of torture and a bullet in the brain. Gordievski bravely chose freedom.

It has been a rather silly season for spies everywhere, what with an avaricious U.S. naval family flogging shopping bags full of secrets to the Soviets and a fat FBI agent apparently falling into a honey trap set by a bibulous Russian *femme fatale* of uncertain IQ and dubious charms.

Then, too, there was that spate of hasty defections eastward by panicked members of the huge spy apparatus the German Democratic Republic maintains in Bonn. It would appear that the East German spymasters do their recruiting largely among bankrupt drunks and lonely ministerial secretaries of a certain age who seem uncommonly susceptible to the blandishments of well-spoken strangers.

Still, defecting Bonn secretaries, disenchanted FBI agents and greedy former U.S. naval persons are very small beer compared to the defection of Gordievski, the chief resident KGB spook in Britain. His coming over has been hailed, depending upon which ex-CIA hack you listen to, as the espionage coup of either the decade or the century. Certainly the British will use it to help erase the embarrassing memory of that old red spy firm of MacLean, Burgess, Philby and Blout.

One of the reports coming out of London also claims that American agents are sitting in on Gordievski's debriefing. This seems highly unlikely or extremely foolish on the part of the British, who should be in no hurry to share their prize with the CIA until they have drained him of every last name, fact and base rumor. After that, for a price—say the cost of his annual maintenance—the CIA would be welcome to what's left.

Just what kind of man is this not-very-secret agent who started double-crossing his own country four years after joining its KGB? Charming, say the Danes. A popular member of the diplomatic corps, they add, who dined frequently with journalists and politicians. Jovial, one must assume. A good mixer. Perhaps a peachy dancer.

By all accounts, Gordievski is not spy fiction's typical KGB villain who all too often is portrayed as a dour and introverted younger clone of Andrei A. Gromyko. Rather, Gordievski seems to be a gregarious, jolly, well-met fellow and probably a crack salesman. Of course, secret agents are often good salesmen. They need to be if they are to con the natives into betraying their own countries. And since Gordievski rose so high in the KGB (and in his moonlighting sideline) he obviously is a rather good politician and something of an actor.

The aftermath of Gordievski's defection did have its amusing moments. After expelling 25 alleged Soviet spies, the British pretended shock when Moscow retaliated by booting out Lord Asquith, a first secretary of Her Majesty's embassy, along with 24 lesser British mortals. In the tit for tat that followed, each country rid itself of six additional foreigners and then called it a draw.

Meanwhile, Gordievski was sequestered in a safehouse somewhere in Britain, naming the names of former colleagues, acquaintances, co-workers, friends and, most likely, a few enemies—for revenge, like greed, is always a powerful motive. Yet Gordievski is simply doing what spies are hired to do: lie, cheat, deceive, steal and corrupt. And if they are double agents, they betray—which is the bill Gordievski must settle up if he is to "become a citizen of a democratic society." Well, it does get nasty in those back alleys of the world that Dean Rusk was always talking about.

Still, the most fascinating questions remain largely unanswered: How did it all start for Gordievski? What made him cross over? Was he having money problems? Or did he suddenly fall in love with democracy in Copenhagen? What was he paid? And what was he promised—a Jaguar and a semidetached in Maida Vale?

I have it on somewhat dubious authority that it all started 19 years ago in the tourist canteen at Elsinore, which is still called the Hamlet Room. The place was jammed with day trippers from Copenhagen, and Gordievski, himself a day tripper, was forced to share a table with a passed-over British army major seconded to MI-6. After a few moments of idle chatter, the passed-over major asked if Gordievski had ever thought of doubling, to which the Soviet agent replied, "Never."

"Bit of money in it, you know," the major said.

"I'll think about it," Gordievski is said to have replied.

If you'd like the name of the major, just study the names of those being knighted when the Queen's next New Year honors list is printed.

Look under the Ds, I'm told. □

Ross Thomas' latest novel, "Briarpatch," won the 1985 Edgar Allen Poe best novel award of the Mystery Writers of America.